TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND HUMANITIES: A PERSPECTIVE BY A BLACKFOOT

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The author has always understood humanities in academia being about humans and their culture including philosophy, worldview, and arts and excluding hard sciences. A definition of humanities that strikes a deep cord with this writer is one framed by the Ohio Humanities Council as follows:

> The humanities are the stories, the ideas, and the words that help us make sense of our lives and our world. The humanities introduce us to people we have never met, places we have never visited, and ideas that may have never crossed our minds. By showing how others have lived and thought about life, the humanities help us decide what is important in our own lives and what we can do to make them better. By connecting us with other people, they point the way to answers about is right or wrong, or what is true to our heritage and our history. The humanities help us address the challenges we face together in our families, our communities, and as a nation.

The above definition of "the humanities," it seems, captures very well the experience of Aboriginal peoples in academia. In other words, Aboriginal peoples are forever explaining themselves to non-Aboriginal people: telling their stories, explaining their beliefs and ceremonies, and introducing ideas that, in many cases, have never crossed the non-Aboriginal mind. The following overview of traditional knowledge serves as a good example of what is meant.

Edward H. Spicer refers to Daniel Corkery to make a point about North American Indians. Corkery, in 1925, had written a book called "The Hidden Ireland." In it he points out that there existed a rich culture in Ireland hidden from the English colonizers. "Few, if any, of the English people were aware of the Irish language, and those who were aware during the eighteen and nineteenth centuries associated it only with illiterate and backward peasantry. …That it had continued into the nineteenth century as a medium of literary life in Ireland was simply beyond the pale of English consciousness." (Spicer, 1980) In other words, Irish culture was hidden from the English. Spicer points out, for instance, "In the United States, the Iroquois and the "Americans" had known each other for more than two hundred years, but the Americans who made policy for New York State in the 1960's knew nothing of the language, the cultural history or the religion of the Seneca." (Spicer, 1980) Writing in 1973, Deloria in GOD IS RED states, "Sincere but unknowing whites honestly asked us less than a decade ago if we still lived in tents, if we were allowed to leave the reservations, and other relevant questions, indicating that for a substantial number of Americans, Indians were still shooting at the Union Pacific on their days off." (Deloria, Jr., 1973, 41) One can, in a similar manner apply the concept of "hiddenness" to traditional knowledge of Aboriginal peoples in North America. Generally speaking, Euro-Canadians and Euro-Americans know very little of the languages, religions,

tradition, sciences, and so on, of North American Aboriginal peoples. Traditional knowledge of Aboriginal people has never been taken seriously because it is usually categorized as superstition or folklore. If one were to ask the typical academic about the utility or importance of traditional knowledge in the academic world s/he would most likely answer, "not much."

There are "tons" of studies of Aboriginal peoples by government, missionaries, and social scientists. But the majority if not all of those studies are done from a Eurocentric perspective based on Western paradigms. Only recently has traditional knowledge of Aboriginal people been experiencing a "coming out" in Canada partially brought about by the intellectual property debate and recent Supreme Court of Canada decisions. "The rush on Indigenous knowledge systems, teachings, and heritage by outsiders is an effort to access, to know, and to assert control over these resources…As Indigenous knowledge and heritage becomes more intensely attractive commercially, the cognitive heritage that gives Indigenous peoples their identity is under assault from those who would gather it up, strip away its honored meanings, convert it to a product, and sell it." (Henderson and Battiste 2000, 12) Deloria makes a similar observation. "When multitudes of young whites roam the West convinced they are Oglala Sioux Pipe Carriers and on a holy mission to protect "Mother Earth" and when priests and ministers, scientists and drug companies, ecologists and environmentalists are crowding the reservations in search of new rituals, new medicines, or new ideas about the land, it would appear as if American Indians finally have it made." (Deloria, Jr., 1995, 13)

Aboriginal people have for a long time questioned the assumptions and methodologies superimposed on their knowledge systems. But only within the recent past with the reluctant acceptance of Native Studies in academia and the consequent increase in the number of Aboriginal scholars trained in the Eurocentric tradition, has the writings of Aboriginal scholars challenging Eurocentric assumptions and methodologies beginning to make "inroads" into academia. But the numbers of Aboriginal scholars and their works are very small in comparison to writings about North American Aboriginal people by non-Aboriginal scholars. The intent of this short paper is not to pass on every piece of writing about Aboriginal traditional knowledge. (Aboriginal people have been explaining themselves to the Colonizers ever since contact.) But the intent is to take a select number of Aboriginal scholars who have actually attempted to articulate the foundational bases of traditional knowledge.

TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE: PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION

As Henderson and Battiste point out, there is no easy answer because it is a comparative question and no satisfactory research methodology exists to answer the question. (Henderson and Battiste, 200, 35 paraphrase) It does not fit neatly into Eurocentric categories like "culture" and its subcategories of religion, social, politics, economics, and so on. Using Eurocentric categories, one can divide knowledge into a whole number of specialized fields such as medicinal, environmental, geographic, cosmic, biological, psychological, scientific knowledge and so forth. But the categorizing processes in Aboriginal languages simply are not complementary to Eurocentric language categorizing processes. Henderson and Battiste point out that "...Indigenous scholars choose to view every way of life from two different but

complementary perspectives: first as a manifestation of human knowledge, heritage, and consciousness, and second, as a mode of ecological order." (Ibid.) In other words, traditional knowledge is not a product or object that can be defined and studied in isolation. It is participatory and experiential. Cajete states, "Native science is not quantum physics or environmental science, but it has come to similar understandings about the workings of the natural laws through experience and participation with the natural world." (Cajete, 2000, 14) Traditional knowledge is about the spiritual and livingness of the natural world and the role of humans in it.

Knowledge of all creation by any one person is impossible. Consequently, traditional knowledge is not a uniform concept across different Aboriginal cultures…" it is a diverse knowledge that is spread throughout different peoples in many layers." (Henderson and Battiste, 2000, 35) It is, in many cases, "…part of the clan, band, and the community, and even the individual, that it cannot be separated from the bearer to be codified into a definition." (Ibid., 36) In other words, there is knowledge that the Aboriginal public knows or is expected to know. But there is knowledge that is unique to clans, bands, societies, and individuals. Some of this knowledge is considered as belonging to the clan, band, society, or tribe but is given to individuals or groups to keep for the benefit of the tribe. The Aboriginal public is not privy to this knowledge but is kept for their benefit by "knowledge keepers."

ABORIGINAL PARADIGMS AND TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

It is an impossibility to explicate and articulate traditional knowledge in all its aspects in a short paper. But in the view of this writer the most important aspect of traditional knowledge is its philosophical and/or paradigmatic base. The philosophy/paradigm is the lens through which all sense datum is interpreted to define reality. The actual application of knowledge is the manifestations of the interpretation of the sense datum based on the philosophy/paradigm.

What are the tenets of native philosophy as articulated by Aboriginal scholars? Little Bear and First Rider have articulated native philosophy in both published and unpublished works. Both scholars state that native philosophy consists of and include ideas of constant motion/flux, all creation consisting of energy waves, everything being animate, all creation being interrelated, reality required renewal, and space as a major referent. (First Rider, 1994, paraphrase) Gary Witherspoon, a non-Aboriginal, studying the Navajo observes, "The assumption that underlies this dualistic aspect of all being and existence is that the world is in motion, that things are constantly undergoing processes of transformation, deformation, and restoration, and that the essence of life and being is movement." (Witherspoon, 1977, 48)

As regards interrelations, THE TASK FORCE ON THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM AND ITS IMPACT ON THE INDIAN AND METIC PEOPLES OF ALBERTA (from here on The Task Force) states:

> The holistic view leads to an implicit assumption that everything is interrelated. Interrelatedness leads to an implicit idea of equality among all creation. Equality is brought about the implicit belief that everything – humans, animals, plants, and

> inorganic matter – has a spirit. Anthropomorphic factors are not important because metamorphosis readily occurs. The common denominator is the spirit. (Task Force, vol, I, 9-3)

Little Bear states that aboriginal philosophy incorporates the idea of renewal. "There is a tacit assumption that, in the cosmic flux, there exist a particular combination of energy waves that allow for our continuing existence. If those particular combinations of energy waves dissolve, this particular reality we are in will disappear in the flux." (Little Bear, 2001, 3) Cajete writing about Native Science observes, "Chaos is both movement and evolution. It is the process through which everything in the universe becomes manifest and then returns to the chaos field. The flux, or ebb and flow, of chaos appear in everything and envelop us at all times and in all places. From the evolving universe to the mountain to the human brain, chaos is the field from which all things come into being. No wonder Native Science envisions the spirit of the natural world alive with disorder becoming order and all the mystery of mirrored relationships." (Cajete, 2000, 16) Consequently, Aboriginal people have a large number of ceremonies revolving around renewal. These ceremonies manifest as sweatlodge, sundance, medicine bundle ceremonies and the like.

First Rider contends space is very important referent in the minds of Aboriginal peoples. Certain events, patterns, cycles, and happenings are readily observable on and from the land, for example animal migrations, cycles of plant life, seasonal rounds, and so on. The cosmos is also observable and its patterns detected from particular special locations. (First Rider, 1994, 14) Vine Deloria, Jr. in GOD IS RED states:

> In shifting from temporal concepts to spatial terms, we find that a revelation is not so much the period of time in which it occurs as the place it may occur. Revelation becomes a particular experience at a particular place, no universal truth emerging but an awareness arising that certain places have a qualitative holiness over and above other places. The universality of truth then becomes the relevance of the experience for a community of people, not its continual adjustment to evolving scientific and philosophical conceptions of the universe. Holy places are well known in what have been classified as primitive religions. The vast majority of Indian tribal religions have a center at a particular place, be it river, mountain, plateau, valley, or other natural feature. (Deloria, Jr. 1973, 80-81)

Little Bear compares and contrast Western thought with Aboriginal thought. "Space is a major referent in the mind of Aboriginal peoples as opposed to time, which is a major referent in the minds of Westerners. The constant flux notion results in a holistic and repetitive view. If everything is forever moving and changing, one has to look at the whole of being to discern developing patterns. It is a way of thinking that looks at the forest and not the trees. The holistic view, in turn, gives rise to values that regard the group as more important than the individual. It values a "generalist" more than the "specialist." (Little Bear, 2001, 4)

For Westerners, according to Little Bear, time is a major referent. Time is a good example of the Western way of thinking. "Time is conceptualized as a straight line. If a Nacirema (American spelled backwards) attempted to picture "time" in his mind, he would see something like a river flowing toward and on past him. What is behind would be the past. What is immediately around him would be the present. The future would be upstream, but he would not be able to see very far upstream because of a waterfall, the waterfall symbolizing the barrier to knowing the future. This line of time is conceptualized as quantity especially as lengths made of units. A length of time is envisioned as a row of similar units." "A logical and inherent characteristic of the concept of time is that once a unit of the river of time flows past a Nacirema it never returns-it is gone forever. This characteristic lends itself to other concepts as "wasting time," "making up time," "buying time," "being on time" which are unique to the Nacirema.

"Another characteristic is that each unit of time is totally different and independent of similar units. Consequently, for the Nacirema, each day is considered a different unit, and thus a different day; every year is a new year. From this the reader can readily understand why there is a need among the Nacirema to have names for days and months and numbers for years." (Little Bear, 1975, 337-8)

For Aboriginal peoples, time just is. Benjamin Whorf writing about the Hopi concept of time states:

> (Time) is a realm of expectancy, of desire and purpose, of vitalizing life, of efficient causes, of thought thinking itself out from inner realm (the Hopian heart) into manifestation. It is in a dynamic state, yet not a state of motion – It is not advancing toward us out of a future, but already with us in vital form, and its dynamism is at work in the field of eventuating or manifesting, i.e. evolving without motion from the subjective by degrees to a result which is the objective. (Whorf, 1950)

Plains Indians, Little Bear says, have similar time concepts. "Blackfoot thinks of time on a two-day operational sense. There is 'now,' 'tomorrow,' and 'day-after tomorrow.' And backwards, 'now,' 'yesterday,' and 'day-before yesterday.' Beyond the two-day limit, forward or backward, past and present amalgamate and become one and the same. Plains Indians are not incapable of talking or thinking of the distant future or past, but it is always done with the 'constant flux' in mind. One of the implications arising out of this notion of time is that the ancestors are always only two days away. The stories, the songs, the ceremonies, the teachings are never more than two days old in the memory of the people. This is quite different from Pierre Elliott Trudeau's statement, typifying Euro-Canadian worldview, to the effect of "these treaties are not worth the paper they are written on." In other words, what is past is past…it is gone forever. The only thing that matters is the future." (Little Bear, 2001, 5)

Cajete in his writing of native science lists the following as the guiding thoughts pervading native science:

*Native science integrates a spiritual orientation.
*Dynamic multidimensional harmony is a perpetual state of the universe.
*All human knowledge is related to the creation of the world and the emergence of humans; therefore, human knowledge is based on human cosmology.
*Humanity has an important role in the perpetuation of the natural processes of the world.
*Every "thing" is animate and has spirit.
*There is significance to each natural place because each place reflects the whole order of nature.
*The history of relationship must be respected with regard to places, plants, animals, and natural phenomena.
*Technology should be appropriate and reflect balanced relationships to the natural world.
*There are basic relationships, patterns, and cycles in the world that need to be understood; this is the proper role of mathematics.
*There stages of initiation to knowledge.
*Elders are relied upon as the keepers of essential knowledge.
*Acting in the world must be sanctioned through ritual and ceremony.
*Properly fashioned artifacts contain the energy of the thoughts, materials, and contexts in which they are fashioned and therefore become symbols of those thoughts, entities, or processes.
*Dreams are considered gateways to creative possibilities if used wisely and practically. (Cajete, 2000, 64-5)

LANGUAGE AND TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Language plays a very important role in philosophy. For Battiste native philosophy operates according to cognitive and linguistic maps. "In short, under tribal knowledge, language is cognitive power." (Battiste, 1978, 17) "Aboriginal languages are sacred to Aboriginal people. They speak in the voice and lessons of a sacred place, an Aboriginal homeland. They are a central source of survival for the diverse people, as well a critical link to a knowledge base given to them by their Creator." (Battiste, 1994, 3) "It can be generally said that Euro-languages like English are very noun-oriented. English is a good language for dichotomies, categorizations, and reductionist-specificity. In its dichotomy mode, it manifests polarized, binary thinking: good and bad; saint and sinner; black and white; old and new; and so on. Aboriginal languages, generally, can be said to be action oriented. Everything is about process, actions, and happenings. It can be said that constant flux manifests itself in the language." (Little Bear, 2001, 5) For Henderson and Battiste, "Where Indigenous knowledge survived, it is transmitted through symbolic and oral traditions." (Henderson and Battiste, 2000, 48) Aboriginal languages are viewed as forms of spirituality. "Indigenous peoples view their languages as forms of spiritual identity. Indigenous languages are thus sacred to Indigenous peoples. They provide the deep cognitive bonds that affect all aspects of Indigenous life." (Ibid. 49) In other words,

Aboriginal languages, because of their action and process orientations, are complementary to the participatory role of Aboriginal people in and with the natural world.

SOME CONCLUSIONARY THOUGHTS

From this brief review, it can be readily seen that Aboriginal traditional knowledge has a very different paradigmatic base from that of Western knowledge. Where as Western knowledge operates from a linear, singular view; where as Western knowledge views the world from order beneath chaos; where as Western languages are very noun oriented, knowledge is about you (first person) in relation to everything else in a relativistic sense. Aboriginal knowledge has a very different "coming to know." It is holistic and cyclical; it views the world from chaos underneath order; its languages are process and action oriented. Knowledge is about participation in and with the natural world. Policy and research implications arising out of Aboriginal paradigms cannot be underestimated. In the Van der Peet case, the Supreme Court of Canada stated, "The Courts must not undervalue the evidence presented by Aboriginal claimants simply because that evidence does not conform precisely with evidentiary standards that would be applied in, for example, a private law case." (R.v.Van der Peet, [1996] 4 C.N.L.R. 177, para. 68) In a similar manner, one can say that Aboriginal traditional knowledge should not be discounted simply because it does not fit neatly into academic standards and categories. If Aboriginal paradigms are not taken into consideration, policy, research, and the 'humanites' will simply miss the mark.

The above overview is a good representation of what the humanities are about. It is the storytelling of what traditional knowledge is about; it is the ideas about reality from a Blackfoot perspective; it about ideas that normally do not cross the Western mind; it is an attempt to connect with the Western mind so it will understand the worldview, the customs and life-ways of peoples like the Blackfoot. It resonates with the definition of the 'humanities' in academia.

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